

Live Humpback Whale Stranding on Long Island, NY
April 2010

- On Tuesday, April 6th, a juvenile humpback whale stranded alive on East Hampton Beach on Long Island, NY. The local stranding network organization, Riverhead Foundation, organized a response team in coordination with NOAA/NMFS NER and HQ staff. It was determined that the whale should be humanely euthanized and expert veterinarians and large whale biologists were deployed on scene to assist.
- The conditions were extremely challenging as the whale was rolling in heavy surf in inclement weather and posed a safety hazard to the human responders. Several attempts were made to sedate the whale via remote darting in order to calm it before proceeding with the euthanasia protocols, but the whale did not respond to the drugs as hoped. There are no established formulas for sedating large whales and the protocols in place for terrestrial mammals do not apply since marine mammals have unique anatomy, physiology and metabolic systems.
- During attempts to sedate the whale on Thursday, April 8th, one of the sedative darts ricocheted off the animal and was lost in the surf. This necessitated alerting local officials and the public about proper procedures for handling the dart should it be found. Even though it is believed that the sedatives in the dart were expelled when it hit the whale, the public still needs to treat the dart with caution since it is sharp at the tip and may contain some trace amount of sedative. Local health officials have been thoroughly briefed and have the necessary medication on hand in the unlikely event that the public comes into contact with the dart and any drug residue.
- The whale was euthanized on Friday, April 9th, utilizing a combination of chemical and ballistic techniques, and a thorough necropsy was conducted. The whale was a juvenile male approximately 30+ feet long and 13 tons, and was estimated to be between 2 and 5 years old. The gross necropsy did not indicate anything obvious that would have caused the stranding, so the pending laboratory analyses on the tissues collected will hopefully provide more clues. Results from the necropsy and lab analyses should be available in a few weeks.
- Some media outlets and individual members of the public have been extremely critical of the situation, and Riverhead Foundation and NMFS staff have been responding to numerous inquiries about the event. Significant efforts have been made to educate the media and public about the inherent difficulties associated with responding to live large whale stranding cases, including:
 - The animal could not be safely moved into deeper water or rehabilitated due to its size, location, environmental conditions.
 - Cetaceans have unique physiological and anatomical adaptations for life in aquatic environments that do not always respond to traditional terrestrial animal veterinary procedures. The field of marine mammal medicine is still developing and there are few established protocols to address large whale health needs.
 - The techniques used in this case have been routinely used by wildlife professionals in the past. Our experience using ballistics to euthanize large whales has been minimal in the U.S. to date, although they have been widely used as standard protocols in Australia and New Zealand.

For more information on recently asked questions please see the FAQ's for this event or contact NOAA NER Marine Mammal Stranding Program at 978-282-8478 or at NERStranding.staff@noaa.gov.